

Marshall “Major” Taylor: A Case Study on the Racism Experienced by a Black Bicycle Racing Champion 1878 to 1932

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Professional bicycle racing became a part of American popular culture at the turn of the century. Tracks were built from Newark to Salt Lake City. A precursor to motor sport, bicycle racing involved the fastest athletes on earth and consequently drew thousands of spectators. The most talented professional sprint racer during the 1890's and early into the twentieth century was Marshall “Major” Taylor. He won all major titles—the United States championship, the world championship and had successful tours of Europe and Australia, consistently beating the best racers on both these continents. Major Taylor's achievements have been largely forgotten in the United States. Though in France his legacy lives on.

The cause of this disparity can be linked to American racism of the time. Major Taylor became a catalyst. He challenged racist practices in order to gain the privilege to compete. He was the first black athlete to compete in integrated competition for an annual American championship. He won the world championship in 1899, nine years prior to Jack Johnson becoming world heavyweight boxing champion and nearly fifty years before Jackie Robinson integrated major league baseball.

This paper attempted to illustrate how Major Taylor's experiences travelling and competing in the United States differed from those abroad, due mainly to institutionalized American racism. Secondly, Taylor's contribution to the integration of sport has been a substantial one, albeit largely overlooked. Therefore by documenting Taylor's achievements a proper understanding of his struggle against racism can be attained.

Primary sources, in the form of newspapers, were the Indianapolis Sentinel and Indianapolis News, both found at the Indianapolis, Indiana Public Library, and the Worcester Telegram, found at the Worcester, Massachusetts Public Library. Also used was Major Taylor's autobiography published in 1928, entitled “The Fastest Bicycle Racer in the World”, The final primary sources used were the scrap books Major Taylor kept during his racing career. Contained in these scrap books are newspaper clippings, race programs and personal letters written by Taylor.

Two major secondary sources were used. One was an interview with Mr. Dale Ogden, curator of the Indiana State Museum. He has given lectures about Major Taylor and has interviewed at great length Mrs. Sidney Taylor Brown, Major Taylor's only child. Secondly, a biography entitled “Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer”, written by Andrew Ritchie was used.

Taylor's story is one of determination and of a constant battle to combat racism which he faced on and off the track in the United States. The same racism that demeaned Taylor's skill and competition record, may have been a contributing factor to his general exclusion in both black history and sport history works.